

**MY HUSBAND LOVED BIRDS VERY MUCH;
WHEREVER I GO, A BIRD IS FOLLOWING ME
SINCE HE WAS MARTYRED**

Çiğdem Topçuoğlu

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Çiğdem Topçuoğlu (1965) was born in Adana, Turkey. She is a national taekwondo athlete, and 2011 champion of Turkey. She joined the Gaza Freedom Flotilla together with her husband Çetin Topçuoğlu (1956) – also a national taekwondo athlete and a coach for Turkey's national taekwondo team – who was martyred by Israeli commandos' gunfire on the *Mavi Marmara* while carrying the wounded to downstairs for treatment. Currently, Çiğdem Topçuoğlu is a taekwondo trainer at Çukurova University in Adana.

How was the atmosphere on the *Mavi Marmara* before the Israeli attack?

The atmosphere on board was very pleasant and joyful. Our experiences both before we set off from Antalya and on board the ship were unforgettable. For example, since we left the Port of Antalya birds kept accompanying us. Sparrows were constantly flying around us, and my husband, Çetin, was taking their photographs. Once, when I didn't see any birds around, I said, "Your birds have left you." Just then a sparrow appeared in the sky; "You see, they didn't leave me," he responded. That bird flew over the people on deck and landed on Çetin's shoulder. It was as if he had a special bond with birds. When we were put in a prison, I was laying my husband's bloodstained clothes on a chair in the yard to dry them up; I was lost in thoughts and was contemplating. Right at that moment, a bird appeared flying madly and perched over the grating since it couldn't get in. I felt as if that bird kept talking to me until I returned to Turkey. Since then a bird has been following me wherever I go. We have got birds in our balcony as well. Since my husband loved birds so much, my Almighty Lord has granted me such a gift.

During the Israeli attack, your husband was wounded along with tens of others and passed away just beside you. Those minutes must have been very tough to endure...

Looking back now, it is not quite possible to comprehend my state of mind and the condition I was in at that time. When my Almighty Lord gives sorrow, He also grants the strength to endure it. I was not left alone there. I perceived the divine benevolence to the last bit. I had seen my husband; maybe his body was lifeless but his soul was with us; that's how I felt. Then I even began to take care of the wounded; because they needed our help. My husband had become a *shaheed* (martyr), and I knew that *shaheeds* do not pass away... Moreover, while we were handcuffed on the upper deck, at one point I was about to pass out and fall down, but a hand caught and held me up. And I looked up to see Çetin. Physically I cannot prove that I saw him, but, yes, he was with me. Praise be to God that I saw him there like that. Besides this, I even saw Çetin serving food in his own memorial gathering on the seventh day of his death.

Could you please tell us what happened both before and during the Israeli attack? I would like to learn your personal experiences.

MY HUSBAND WAS SHOT WHILE HE WAS CARRYING THE WOUNDED IN. WHILE I WAS PERFORMING CPR, I FELT SOMETHING BURST BELOW MY HAND; IT WAS SUCH A BULLET THAT IT BURST INSIDE HIS BODY. BLOOD BEGAN TO COME OUT OF HIS MOUTH AND NOSE. I NOTICED THAT A BULLET HAD PIERCED THROUGH BEHIND HIS HEAD, AND HE HAD BULLETS IN HIS TORSO.

On 30 May around 10:00 p.m., my husband and I had noticed lights around the ship and were worried. Then we contacted with the other vessels of the Flotilla and learnt that the Israeli Navy had surrounded us. Consequently, the scheduled live concert broadcast for the night, that people on board were eagerly awaiting, was cancelled. At midnight, we saw the battle frigates around us moving back and forth tightening around our boat. My husband Çetin was with me. We recited *Surah al-Yasin* from the Qur'an and prayed on deck until dawn. Then while we were splitting for *fajr* (dawn) prayer, Çetin said, "May Allah protect you," and I told him to be cautious. He checked my life jacket and tightened it so tight that I couldn't breathe for a moment. I said, "Çetin, it's too tight!" and he said, "Promise me, you won't take off this life jacket, and I won't see you upstairs." I replied, "I can't promise that," and went downstairs. Then I prayed the *fajr* prayer, and just as I completed the prayer a friend showed up and said, "We are under attack, pray and stay calm!" And all of us began to pray at that moment. I had already closed the iron windows of the cabin for security of the women. We placed some women at the door of the cabin as guards, to stop anyone from going out unnecessarily and to avoid any kind of chaos.

After a while, I went to the upper deck where I saw Çetin carrying the wounded in. He brought in our neighbour, then a friend, and then an Israeli soldier. I saw a phosphorus green colour over his left arm and said, "Honey, you're wounded!" He had a nice jacket on him and replied pointing it, "Don't worry, nothing goes through this." Then he left saying, "Okay honey, take care of yourself." We were in a passageway where they were bringing in the wounded. I wanted to go out through the left side, and Çetin was at the opposite side; there was twenty metres between us. I don't know how he came all that way so soon, but somehow he did and said, "Get back in!" When I was in, I was able to hear his voice since he was always saying something and warning people like, "Take good care of the wounded!" Af-



Çiğdem Topçuoğlu just beside the coffin of his husband at the funeral

ter a while, I noticed that I couldn't hear his voice anymore. I asked a brother nearby if he had seen Çetin. As he said, "Çetin is all right," I stepped outside, and saw somebody lying on the floor. It took me a while to realise that it was Çetin. I went to him and touched his feet. I muttered things like, "Why are you lying down here? Get up! It's like a war zone. I think you got wounded." Then I held his left arm up, but he didn't respond, and it fell down. Upon that I checked his breath and heartbeat; he was breathing deeply. I cut up his clothing to check his wound, but I couldn't notice any bleeding. I began to perform CPR. While I was performing CPR for a second time, I felt something burst below my hand. It was such a bullet that it burst inside his body. Right after this, blood began to come out of his mouth and nose. At that point, I noticed that a bullet had pierced through behind his head, and he had bullets in his torso as well. I remember telling the doctor, "Doctor, he is still breathing, put a tube in his mouth." They put a [endotracheal] tube in his mouth. Then, the doctor instructed others to take me away since he didn't know that I was his wife. Actually I was not aware of what I did, but I don't think I did anything inappropriate.

"Çetin, please say one last thing to me. I know you're leaving us," I told him. I was praying to hear one last thing from him. My Almighty Lord accepted my prayers, and I heard Çetin mutter and try to say something to me. Then, I gave him some water, recited the Qur'an and said, "I'm pleased with you and May Allah be pleased with you. I have absolutely forgiven any wrong you might have

THEY INTERROGATED ME AT THE PRISON. SHOWING MY HUSBAND'S PICTURES, THEY ADDRESSED ME SILLY QUESTIONS LIKE, "IS THIS PERSON YOUR HUSBAND OR NOT? HOW MANY ISRAELI SOLDIERS DID HE KILL? WHICH TERROR ORGANIZATION ARE YOU AFFILIATED WITH? WHY DID YOU COME HERE TO OCCUPY OUR LANDS?" THEIR MISTREATMENT LASTED UNTIL WE LEFT THE PRISON.

done.¹ I promise that your blood will not be forgotten, will not be in vain; both my son and I will follow in your footsteps." My last words were, "You're leaving us; convey my greetings to our Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon Him)." Then I closed his eyes and left...

After your husband lost his life before your eyes, you were taken captive by the killers of your husband and then put into an Israeli prison. What did you experience during this ordeal?

Since the moment we were taken captive, we began to see the true face of Israel. We were subjected to several kinds of insults. For instance, the friends had asked if I could go to toilet and told the soldiers that my husband became a *shaheed* on board; but the soldiers did not allow me. They were constantly insulting us. There was a flag on the floor, and the moment I bent over to take it, they suddenly pointed a barrel to my head. They pushed it to my head so hard that my headscarf slipped for a second over my head. They tried to make me sit by pushing and shoving me.

While we were getting off the ship at the Port of Ashdod, the soldiers had lined at both sides of the stairs. While passing through, they were constantly prodding us with their guns and pushing us around. As they were crushing us in their Robocop like gears, we felt pain all over our bodies. They behaved in a civilized manner in front of cameras when we got off the ship; but after that, they treated us brutally.

In the prison cell, there was projector beaming every half hour. They interrogated me at the prison. Rather than being alone, I wanted to go in interrogation with one of our lawyer friends. But I wasn't allowed and was taken to interrogation alone. They showed me the photos of the *shaheeds* as they knew my husband was one of them. When I saw the photo of our friend Cevdet [Kılıçlar], I recognized him, and reacted accordingly saying, "Oo, this is brother Cevdet!"

¹ This is an expression that Muslims usually say while leaving each other.



Topçuoğlu family: Aytek (son), Çiğdem and Çetin

Upon my reaction, they asked me, “How do you know him?” I told them he was taking photographs on board and helped us in the pressroom. At last, they showed me my husband’s photos by addressing me silly questions like, “Is this person your husband or not? How many Israeli soldiers did he kill? Which terror organization are you and your husband affiliated with? Why did you come here to occupy our lands?” The people in interrogation spoke Turkish very well in Istanbul accent. Their mistreatment lasted until we left the prison. We weren’t allowed to make calls. I didn’t drink or eat anything they gave in the prison.

They applied a different method of abuse on the way to the airport. The prison van was as cold as ice. Our friends banged on the door telling them to turn it off; but the soldiers turned it higher. They didn’t want to give me back my passport. I demanded to turn back to Turkey along with my husband’s body, but was refused. Upon this, I let them know that I would not leave, and said, “I’m not getting on the airplane until you show me my husband’s body.” An official came up and said, “Your husband’s body has been sent to Turkey, madam.” This official, who was extremely polite and spoke Turkish, said, “My family is Jewish, I am here for my job.” They knew quite well that I was not going to trust them; thus, they were trying to behave me politely and sincerely. I knew that they would lie in any way. So I said, “I don’t trust you; I’m not getting on the airplane unless I see my husband’s body with my own eyes.” At that moment, the Turkish Airlines manager, who worked there, had arrived. I asked him if my husband’s body was sent to Turkey or not, and learnt that it was not. This took place in front of the Israeli official. As soon as I learnt this, I said,

“How can I trust you? You’d told me he was sent, but the manager here tells just the opposite. From now on, it’s impossible for me to leave here. I’ll see my husband’s coffin with my own eyes and put him into the airplane with my own hands.” The officials immediately panicked and hastily took me to the passport control point. I didn’t have my passport with me, and told them they had it, but they denied this. Within five minutes, they showed up holding a copy of the first page of my passport, and passed me through the check point in this way.

There I saw the brothers I knew from the ship; they were waiting. They were checking those who passed the passport control point and got on the airplane to make sure there was no one left behind. I started waiting next to them. I saw brother Bülent [Yıldırım] for a few seconds and was relieved. Because his photos were shown to me during the interrogation as well, and questions were asked about him. So I was quite worried about his welfare. At that moment, Israeli authorities took brother Bülent in for interrogation. We, together with the last group left there, waited for brother Bülent; everyone else had got on the airplane. Brother Bülent said when he got out of the interrogation, “Come on Çiğdem, they’ll bring brother Çetin along,” and upon this word, I got on the airplane with the last group.

After all what you have lived through, what kind of an outcome would satisfy you?

This is not my personal matter, but a matter of the *ummah* (the Muslim nation). Israel’s apology or compensation, personally, does not mean anything to me; because the blood that was shed is sacred for us. Will Israel apologise and compensate for every loss, for each person it has murdered since 1948, for each crime and massacre it has committed? If they do so, I would feel a little bit relieved.